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**The Doctrinal Inflexibility Afforded a Branch: How to Break the  
Paradigm from Risk Avoidance to Opportunity Exploitation.**

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by  
the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

04 May 2009

## **Abstract**

Branches and sequels, as defined in U.S. joint doctrine, are designed to allow the commander to plan adequately for the “what if” and “what’s next” respectively. These doctrinal terms have specific, distinct meaning in application within the operational idea and design process. However, as the dynamic nature of warfare continues to evolve in a subsequently asymmetrical manner, our enemies continue to challenge our doctrinal approaches toward war fighting. The Joint Force Commander (JFC) must be offered correspondingly dynamic methods of implementing operational design. This does not specifically entail a radical new approach toward doctrine development; we have seen that development of new doctrine is intensive in both time and application. Current operations should drive both the development of new doctrine while correspondingly searching for innovative adaptation of current methods. Re-examining our own framework in operational development, as well as historical precedents has the potential of offering the Joint Force Commander the flexibility demanded within established doctrinal structure. Development of branches and sequels have always allowed the commander to look forward on the battlefield to answer those age old questions of “what if” and “what’s next.” The further development of branches and how they possibly couple with direct sequel transition could allow those two questions to be answered concurrently in a method that offers acceleration of tempo, creation of depth and space, as well as employing the application of economy of force.

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Admiral Halsey, as we have seen, proposed on 13 September to bypass the Paulus, but Admiral Nimitz did not accept this suggestion. He felt that Peleliu and Kossol Passage were needed as staging points for Leyte, and Wilkerson's expedition was already at sea and within two days of the objective when Halsey's proposition was put to him. From hindsight it seems probable that STALEMATE II should have been countermanded. It was useful, but hardly worth the expenditure of 1,950 American lives.<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Eliot Morrison, *Leyte*

Some 1,950 American lives gone, gone in an operation that may have been avoided, gone because the momentum that carried them to the shores of Peleliu could not be abated.

STALEMATE II was an intensely planned operation that encompassed thousands of individuals, a tremendous amount of equipment, as well as innumerable hours of coordination. Was it in the intense effort to undertake this operation that Admiral Nimitz felt it necessary to carry on as planned instead of taking the advice of his subordinate? Had the detailed planning also considered the potential opportunities presented by Halsey? If Admiral Nimitz had allowed for greater flexibility in his operational design could he have avoided such immense casualties for an island that in the words of a veteran and historian of the conflict "was a convenience, but not a necessity?"<sup>2</sup>

The design of major operations develops the mission into tasks; sequenced, phased and synchronized through the intended Line of Operation (LOO) to the objective. Two subordinate operations utilized in fulfilling these tasks are branch and sequel planning. Within doctrine these methods are coupled together for instruction, yet maintain two distinct meanings in accordance with mission accomplishment. Currently, doctrinally described, branches are often viewed in a myopic, reactive manner, intended to protect the intended LOO. Because of this doctrinal bias, branch planning has not matured within operational

design in order to become viewed as a method of exploiting opportunity. Correspondingly, the ability of the JFC to recognize and exploit opportunity through branch planning is not being applied. This failure to recognize opportunity through flexibility is being overlooked due to the current doctrinal definition of a branch, its anemic explanation within doctrine, as well as its minimal application within the Joint Operational Planning Process (JOPP). With recognition of potential opportunity and the adjustment and minor expansion of steps within JOPP, fully developed branch planning can serve as a potentially lucrative means to achieve operational objectives through direct branch to sequel transition.

This study argues the value of a concept of generating tempo through the direct planning for direct branch to sequel transition utilizing the indirect method of attacking an enemy's Center of Gravity (COG), by initially defining the elements of operational design that make up the LOO. Inherent to the LOO is the concept of the branch, in which the doctrinal definition will be critiqued. After discussing these doctrinal applications two distinct possibilities, coupled with historical examples of each, will be offered as alternatives to the classic application of a branch plan. Within each historical example an analysis of the factors of ends, ways, means and risk as well as time, space and force, elements essential to the exploitation of a branch, will be considered. Counterarguments will be discussed from the view of the historical examples and their shortfalls. This examination will conclude with proposed adjustments to the current doctrinal perspectives on the concept of branch planning. Conclusions will be drawn from the current definitions, doctrine and application. The end state is to offer the JFC a method of viewing opportunities, created through branch plans, as a method for seamless translation to a sequel.

## **I. THE ELEMENTS OF OPERATIONAL DESIGN:**

Joint Publication 3-0, *Joint Operations*, details the elements of operational art and design that are used to formulate and visualize an operation. These elements entail synchronizing the operational objective to a strategic objective, defining decisive points, intermediate objectives, LOOs, sequels and branches.

As defined in doctrinal publications, the strategic military objective supports the overall goal of fulfilling the national strategic objectives.<sup>3</sup> The operational military objective therefore supports both the former and the latter in its accomplishment. In order to accomplish these objectives it is imperative to define the enemy's Center of Gravity (COG). How the COG is attacked is formulated by what conditions the JFC determines to end the conflict, and can be by either direct or indirect methods.<sup>4</sup> The COG "comprises the source of power that provides freedom of action, physical strength, and the will to fight,"<sup>5</sup> and is broken into three distinct elements; critical capabilities, critical requirements and critical vulnerabilities.<sup>6</sup> Once defined the JFC will assess how he applies assets and capabilities to "exploit [critical] vulnerabilities" through the identification of Decisive Points (DP).<sup>7</sup>

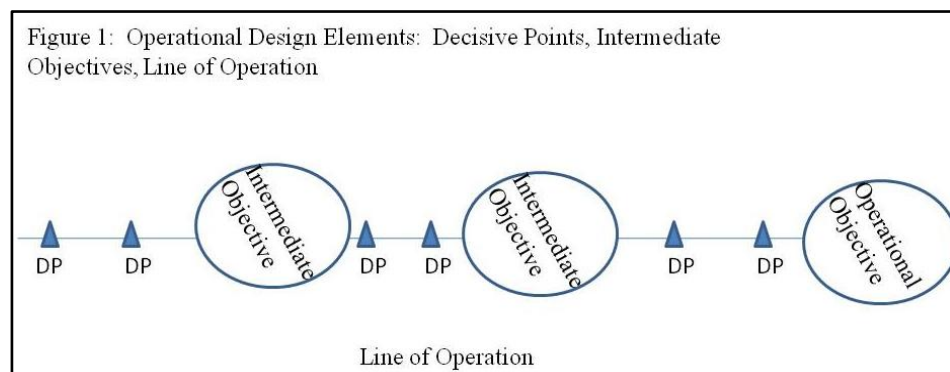
Joint Advanced Warfighting School's "Operational Campaign Primer" states "Objectives and their supporting effects provide the basis for identifying tasks to be accomplished."<sup>8</sup> These "tasks to be accomplished" during a specific operational phase are subsequently translated into DPs which allow the commander to "gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contributes materially to achieving success."<sup>9</sup> During the planning process, as DPs are identified, forces will be allocated in order to ensure their subsequent seizure (or denial to the enemy, if applicable). As DPs are secured they will subsequently translate into a distinct advantage in the force's ability to seize and hold an intermediate objective.

In order to provide depth to an operation, inherent to attacking an enemy's center of gravity indirectly, the JFC will establish intermediate military objectives that support the operational military objective. As defined, intermediate objectives are “an area or feature between the line of departure and an objective that must be seized and or held.”<sup>10</sup>

Intermediate objectives are the connective tissue between operational objective and the tactical actions necessary to accomplish such. Intermediate objectives allow for the concentration of forces and in most cases signal the end of that phase of the operation. It is at that point that the JFC will assess the impact the operation has had on both the friendly and enemy forces as well as his direction of operations as planned and its effects on attacking the enemy's COG.

Once operational objectives, DPs, and intermediate objectives are established, the JFC will have a conceptual idea of how these elements should be accomplished. Depending on the operation, but germane to this discussion, is the physical LOO. A physical LOO “connect[s] the force with its base of operations and objectives when positional reference to the enemy is a factor.”<sup>11</sup> This tool is utilized by the JFC in order to “visualize...and describe the linkages of various actions on nodes and/or decisive points with an operational or strategic objective.”<sup>12</sup> Jomini, the originator of this concept, envisioned LOOs as the paths

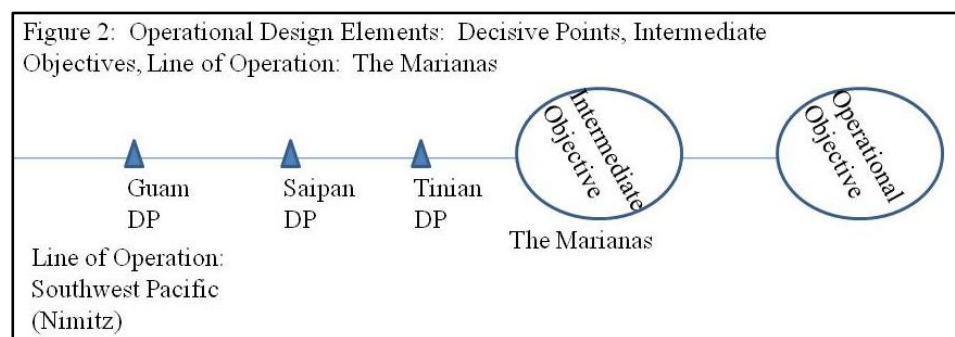
“the army would follow to reach one of [the] decisive points.”<sup>13</sup> Figure 1 serves as a



graphical example of these concepts.

During the Pacific Campaign of 1941-1945, the ultimate operational objective was the defeat of the Japanese Armed Forces (COG), in order to meet the strategic objective, the defeat of Japan. Subsequently, during the island hopping campaign, the islands were identified as DPs while control of the island chain itself was the intermediate operational objective. Each operation executed served to indirectly attack the enemy's COG by diminishing Japanese combat power, while concurrently serving as a point for concentrating forces and as a planning element for transition to subsequent sequels. The sequence of how the island campaigns were conducted, along the axis generating from operating bases to the coastal waters of Japan is an example of a physical LOO. An example of this concept is seen within the Marianas Campaign. The multiple islands within the Marianas chain (Guam/Tinian/Saipan) were identified as DPs due to their garrison by Japanese forces, as well as their infrastructure and geographic position from mainland Japan. The seizure of these DPs, with the island chain as the intermediate objective, allowed U.S. forces the ability

to establish an  
airbase for  
sequeling to the  
strategic  
bombing phase



against Japan.<sup>14</sup> Figure 2 serves as a graphical example of these concepts.

## **II. SEQUELS AND BRANCHES:**

As considered earlier, intermediate objectives allow for concentration of forces along the LOO in order to begin the next phase, or sequel of the operation. “Sequel plans are

developed during execution based on the adjustment of current operations for adjustment to future operations,”<sup>15</sup> or to put it another way, sequels are based upon the success or failure of the operation as well as the enemy’s actions up until that point. The concept of sequencing operations became relevant during the Napoleonic period, when it was recognized that “pre-conditions” needed to be achieved in order to conduct the decisive battle to defeat the enemy.<sup>16</sup> These “pre-conditions” became major operational actions undertaken to achieve a positional or force advantage over the opponent eventually culminating in the demise of the enemy’s combat strength. Major operations during World War II, such as Operation GOODWOOD and COBRA, were sequels to the Normandy landings (Operation NEPTUNE) in order to breakout from the Normandy beachhead and gain maneuver space for future operations.<sup>17</sup>

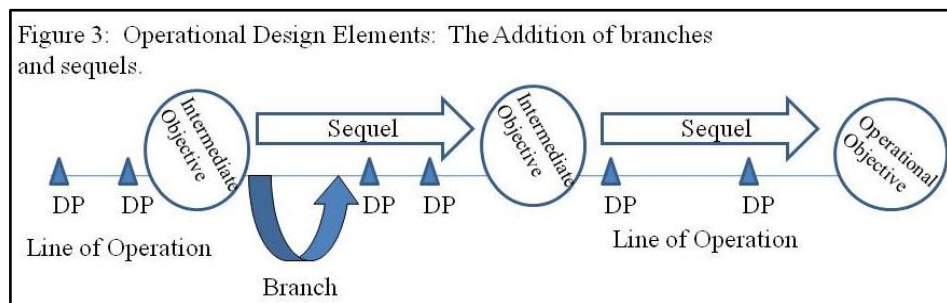
If the sequel to current operations answers the “what’s next” in the operation then the branch answers the “what if” to that same operation. In the view of Liddel-Hart, branches were paths to alternate objectives; the key is to develop a plan that provides opportunity to strike at different points.<sup>18</sup> Joint doctrine, defines a branch as:

The contingency options built into a basic plan. A branch is used for changing the mission, orientation, or direction of movement of a force to aid success of the operation based on anticipated events, opportunities, or disruptions caused by enemy actions and reactions.<sup>19</sup>

Branch plans are developed in order to account for not only the enemy’s actions but also the unknowns that cannot be answered in the initial planning process. “Branches add flexibility to plans by anticipating situations that could alter the basic plan.”<sup>20</sup> Branches, if executed, are intended to respond rapidly to changing conditions, while protecting the intended LOO and its associated geometry (DPs and intermediate objectives). Branch plans can quickly overcome a planning staff, whose job it is to answer and formulate counteractions. Modern

doctrinal publications specifically point out that effort should be made to avoid over planning for these possible eventualities due to the inherent need to focus the vast majority of available planning time into the primary COA.<sup>21</sup> This consideration is inherently associated with the concept of risk, and either the acceptance or mitigation of risk. For example, in December of 1944, General Eisenhower recognized the weakness inherent to his positions around the Ardennes Forest on the Western Front. He subsequently accepted the risk to his LOO, took action to remove vital logistic elements from the immediate threat, and put in place branch plans with both his 3<sup>rd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Armies in the event of a German attack.<sup>22</sup> It was the overwhelming German force and speed, coupled with severe weather, which subsequently transformed acceptable risk and moderate planning into full blown crisis response.

Figure 3 continues the building process of the



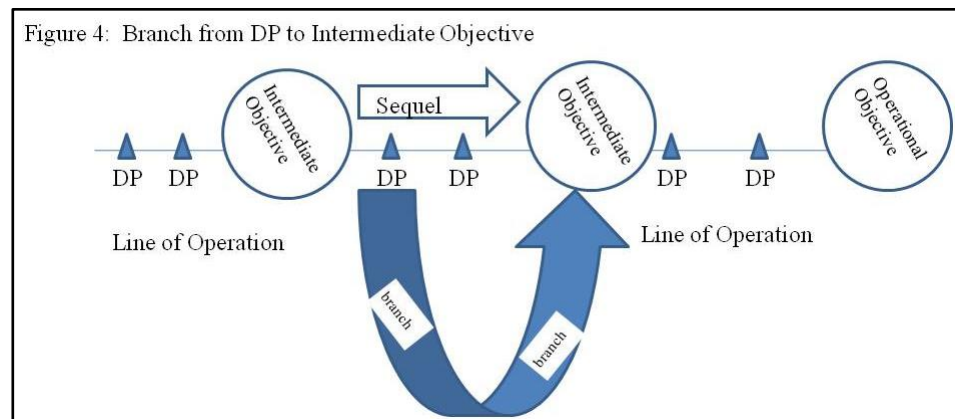
operational design elements with the addition of branches and sequels.

Armed with this review of existing doctrinal understanding of operational design geometry, this examination will now consider examples of two non-typical branch scenarios that both portray operational flexibility as well as exploitation of opportunity rather than only protecting against risk.

### **III. BYPASSING PRE-ESTABLISHED DECISIVE POINTS:**

The first scenario is the ability of a branch plan to respond to the negated value of pre-established DPs along the line of operation, equating to a direct branch to intermediate

objective and subsequent sequel transition. This would entail recognition that upon achieving a DP the force has gained enough of a marked advantage upon the enemy that it can move directly to the intermediate objective. This move itself would be a branch, recognizing opportunity to both protect the line of operation and application of economy of force for eventual sequencing. Within the initial planning process it would then be necessary to identify which elements essential to the objective can be identified in each DP and then overlay them to each specific DP as uncovered. This would allow for the effective

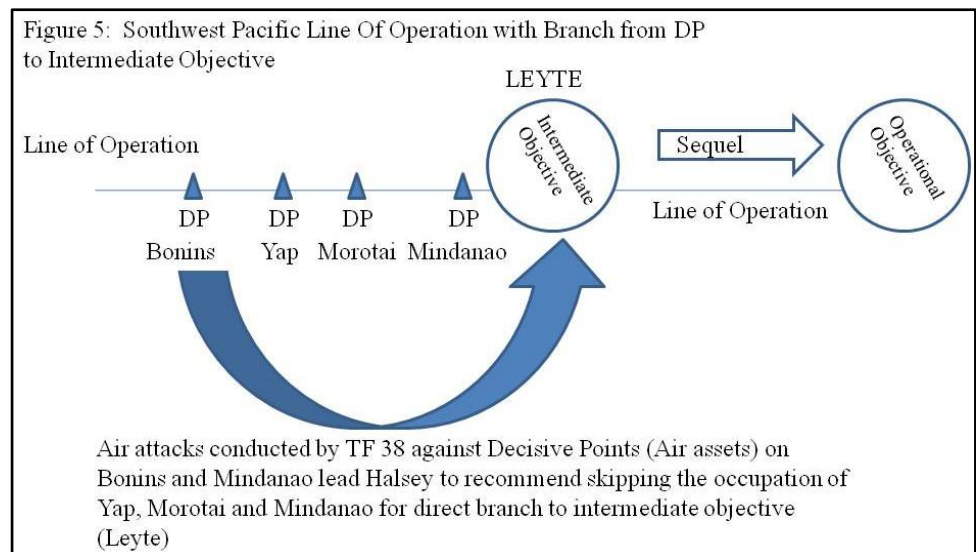


planning of branches of opportunity as they arise. Figure 4 illustrates the concept of DP to direct branch to sequel transition.

The Pacific Campaign offers an excellent example of this concept in the plans leading to the landings in Leyte. Following direct meetings between Admiral Nimitz (Central Pacific), General MacArthur (Southwest Pacific) and President Roosevelt in Hawaii in July of 1944, the Combined Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) issued guidance for the approved invasion of Leyte, the intermediate objective, in order to begin the liberation of the Philippines.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, the CJCS stated that the islands of Morotai and Yap would be occupied by 5 October, as well as Mindanao on 15 November 1944. These islands were deemed DPs in order to provide land based air support to the Leyte landings scheduled for 20 December 1944. Additionally, these islands served as air bases for Japanese forces and their seizure

and subsequent offensive operations would weaken the Japanese air assets, thus reducing their affect on the eventual Leyte landings. Admiral Halsey, commanding Task Force (TF) 38, was assigned the task of attacking Japanese air assets and ground targets on Mindanao and the adjacent Bonin Islands prior to the scheduled landing. In the application of his attack, Halsey found little to no resistance from the Japanese Air Force, and subsequently recommended to Nimitz (and thus MacArthur) that the planned invasions of “Yap, Morotai and Mindanao be cancelled as unnecessary, and that the troops which were to be used at these targets, as well as TF38 be made available to General MacArthur for an immediate seizure of Leyte.”<sup>24</sup> This bold recommendation and the eventual approval by the CJCS accelerated the invasion of Leyte forward by eight weeks.<sup>25</sup> This was possible due to the re-allocation of forces already embarked for the invasion of these preliminary islands to be

transferred to General MacArthur for the Leyte invasion, to include ground forces destined for Yap as well



as TF 38. Figure 5 graphically depicts the DP-branch-intermediate objective transition in 1944.

A clear appreciation of the interaction of ends, ways, means and risk was applied in the planning process before the actual branch to intermediate objective was initiated. The

objectives (ends) of TF 38 operations were to reduce Japanese air assets on these islands in order to stop their interference in the forthcoming Leyte operations. Additionally, ground forces would occupy Yap, Morotai and Mindanao in order to establish land based airfields to support the Leyte landings. TF 38, as well as XXIV Army Corps was the means to achieve these DPs. However, upon recognizing the absence of Japanese air assets the decision to omit these landings was balanced against the risk of not establishing land based airfields to support the Leyte operations. This risk was assumed due to the belief that, because of the paucity of Japanese air strength, any and all air assets could be provided by TF 38 for the Leyte landing until such a time that airfields could be established on Leyte itself.<sup>26</sup>

#### **IV. BRANCH TO SEQUEL TRANSITION:**

Another option for broadening the value of branch plans is the opportunity for a branch plan, while in execution, to become the starting point for a planned sequel, ultimately either negating the pre-established DPs *and* intermediate objective, or meeting some if not all of their elements. Like most operations, the planning that is done prior to execution is based upon the best set of assumptions made at the time. These assumptions include decisions made to establish DPs and intermediate objectives prior to the beginning of the initial phase of the operation or a subsequent sequel. DPs, by their nature, “can be thought of [as] a way to relate what is ‘critical’ to what is ‘vulnerable.’”<sup>27</sup> The underlying basis of their incorporation into the plan is to “affect the enemy’s Center of Gravity or to gain and maintain the initiative.”<sup>28</sup>

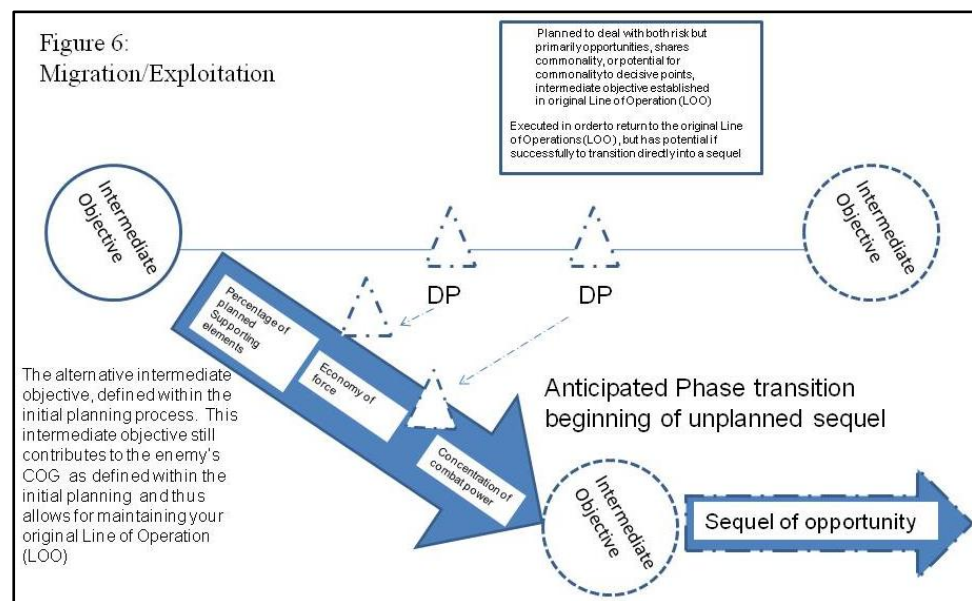
DPs are not doctrinally assigned to branch plans based on the fact that we may not execute branches. Additionally, the assumption has been made in the past that the intent of the branch is to ultimately return to the intended LOO. This approach has diminished the opportunities

and flexibility encountered during execution and in some way is the antithesis of the speed, flexibility and avoidance of patterns the commander seeks.<sup>29</sup>

This concept also entails recognition that you may be uncovering a future intermediate objective or ultimate objective that you did not plan on encountering until a later phase. As noted earlier, sequenced operations are conducted to create depth in order to create conditions to attack the enemy's COG indirectly.

What we are left with is a branch plan, whose initiation we assume could be triggered along the LOO. A branch plan that has potential to develop or migrate DPs in order to meet planned, alternate or unexpected intermediate objectives of opportunity. This concept is

graphically depicted in Figure 6 and offers the core concepts of branch to sequel transition.



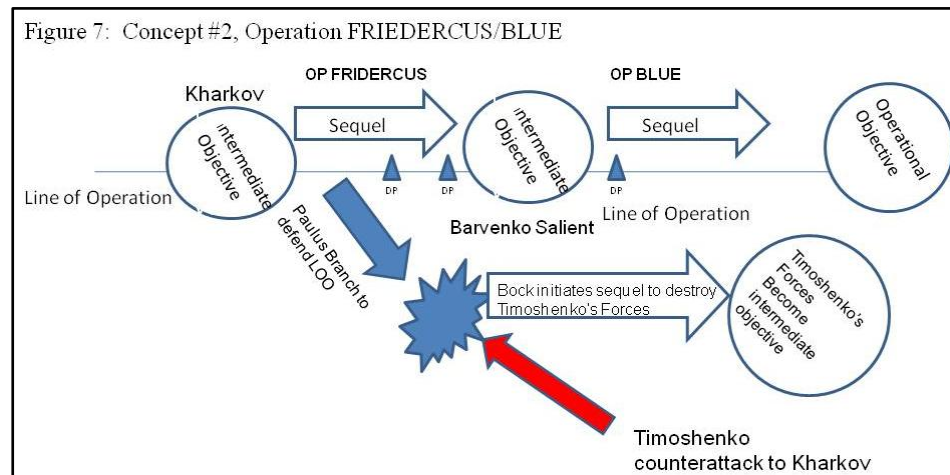
An historical

example that best illustrates this concept is the German summer offensive on the Eastern Front in 1942. Operation BLUE, envisioned German forces regaining the offensive after the disastrous winter of 1941, in which the Germans had lost substantial ground on all sectors of the Eastern Front. Adolf Hitler, instead of continuing to drive toward Moscow by means of Army Group Center, decided to switch focus to Army Group South in order to finish the

reduction of Sevastopol and capture the agricultural and oil rich Caucasus region.<sup>30</sup> The ultimate operational objective was the encirclement and destruction of what was considered to be the last remaining Soviet forces capable of mounting a defense in depth. In order to begin the offensive from favorable positions, 6<sup>th</sup> Army, under the command of General Friedrich Paulus, was tasked with “the elimination of the Barvenkovo salient gained by [the Soviets] during the [previous] January offensive.”<sup>31</sup> Operation FRIEDERCUS was planned for 18 May 1942, however on 12 May the Soviets launched an attack in strength in order to retake Kharkov, a key communication and logistics node (DP). The 6<sup>th</sup> Army immediately initiated a defensive branch plan in order to protect their LOO and contain the Soviet attack. Within the execution of this defensive branch plan the Germans were severely mauled forcing Paulus to consider abandoning his planned offensive. However, Paulus’s immediate superior, Field Marshal Bock, recognized that a “bold counterattack with Kleist’s Panzer Army (then in reserve) could transform setback into victory.”<sup>32</sup> In addition to Kleist’s forces as well as Paulus, Bock also committed a large portion of his offensive air power in order to exploit the opportunity presented by the Soviets.

The end result was that within two weeks over 240,000 prisoners and 2,000 guns were taken as the Soviets completely collapsed under the combined weight of the German forces.<sup>33</sup> The Germans immediately transitioned into offensive operations dictated by Operation BLUE and began the summer offensive on 1 June. This opportunity was recognized for numerous reasons, but two stand out the most. First, the German forces were poised to begin their planned offensive operations dictated by Operation BLUE with the overall mission of trapping and destroying Soviet forces by overwhelmingly fast mechanized maneuvers. Second, Field Marshall Bock, upon recognizing the elements of his ultimate operational

objective as well as corollary effects of his intermediate objective (the reduction of the Barvenkovo salient) was able to concentrate all elements of combat power quickly and efficiently enough to turn a setback into an opportunity. Figure 7 illustrates Paulus's branch to counter the Soviet attack (led by General Timoshenko) as well as Bock's recognition of opportunity to conduct a branch to sequel transition directly into Operation BLUE.



The Germans optimized the concept of balancing ends, ways, means and risk ideally to this operation. First, Field Marshal Bock was able to identify that the overall ends of Operation BLUE were still pertinent and achievable even in the form of a counterattack. The Soviet's preemptive attacks on his forces were in effect bringing the way to his doorstep, rather than being unearthed through initial offensive operations meant to straighten his front lines and thus equating to a diminishment of combat power. Additionally, because of the planning preparations and reinforcement of Army Group South, he had the means coiled and ready to conduct offensive operations immediately. This operation did entail General Paulus assuming a great deal of risk to his forces as he battled the Soviet attack with 6<sup>th</sup> Army, while Bock concentrated Kleist's Panzer Army as well as air assets for the counterattack. However, even with the brunt of the Soviet attack bearing against him Paulus was able to coordinate effectively with Kleist and counterattack in order to seal the Soviet forces in the

Barvenkovo salient within days of transition from defensive to offensive operation.

Hindsight proves Bock's decisions to have been made effectively through the balance of all of these factors and contributed greatly to the initial success of Operation BLUE.

This example effectively illustrates several points associated with branch to sequel transition. The aforementioned key element of prior planning and preparation was pertinent to the overall success of the operation; however, the Germans were not prescient enough to envision their application in that manner prior to the Soviet attack. What the Germans were perceptive enough to recognize was how the elements of time/space/force could be brought to bear in a situation for which they had not planned for but were flexible enough to exploit.

#### **V. COUNTERARGUMENTS:**

First, arguments could be made that further development of branch plans diminishes both economy of force and the emphasis on the chosen COA. In fact, the inherent drawback of branch execution is the reduction of strength along the intended LOO prosecuting the chosen COA, is a drain on all elements of combat and supporting power. The aforementioned branch plans GOODWOOD and COBRA, while attempting to gain operational maneuver space, did not specifically lead to the seizure of the ports of Antwerp, the initial intermediate objective of the Normandy campaign.<sup>34</sup> However, if branch plans are anticipated to occur during the initial planning process, it would behoove the application of some type of deliberate planning at a minimum to exercise options. GOODWOOD and COBRA were planned after the scenario developed, contradicting the ease in which the Allies believed they would enlarge the initial lodgment.<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, DPs were chosen under the best assumptions possible and skipping them may imperil the very nature of achieving your operational objective. As recognized by Samuel

Morrison, Admiral Halsey's decision to recommend bypassing Yap, Morotai, and Mindanao was a "radical change to the timeline."<sup>36</sup> A change that would eventually have dire tactical events as the Japanese air assets re-emerged following the Leyte landings, while the Allied forces struggled to establish land based airfields. However, Morrison also attributed the "countervailing advantages to the speed-up [as] immense" since it forced the Japanese to rush inexperienced and partially trained pilots into combat to their eventual detriment.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the point can be made that these methods expose the JFC to unnecessary risk. As previously considered, General Eisenhower, during the Battle of the Bulge, was willing to accept risk to his line of operation by not adequately reinforcing a weakness within his Forward Line of Troops (FLOT). The results are still lamented today as an operational setback that elongated the conflict. However, Eisenhower was quick to grasp the opportunity that Hitler had presented him by committing his last operational reserve to an area that was limited in both depth and strategic relevance.<sup>38</sup> Advocating the assumption of unheeded risk is not the theme of this document, rather it is applying the lens of opportunity against that risk. Additionally, if this fact can be recognized early within the planning process then avoidance of the operational surprise that befell the allies in 1944 can be avoided.

Finally, failure to identify adequate branch planning opportunities, evaluated against ends, ways, means, risk as well as time, space, and force effectively allowed Admiral Halsey to lose sight of the operational objective as he pursued Ozawa's decoy forces during the Battle of Leyte.<sup>39</sup> It is incumbent to view any and all expenditures of combat and supporting power as a means to impact our enemy in an adverse manner, which entails ensuring that opportunities are identified, planned for, approved by the JFC, and promulgated to his subordinate staff.

## **VI. ANALYSIS:**

The aforementioned historical examples illustrated the relevance of recognizing opportunity and its effects in generating tempo. Additionally, they both expounded upon the idea of operational flexibility inherent within a branch plan itself. Both examples emphasized the application of an operational commander's vision in exploiting opportunity where and when presented. Moreover, the elements of ends, ways, means and risk as well as time, space and force were properly applied in order to reach a decision for implementation.

As previously defined, a branch "aid[s] [in] success of the operation based on anticipated events, opportunities, or disruptions caused by enemy actions and reactions."<sup>40</sup> First, other than its limit to a single word, opportunity in this scenario may be better defined by its synonyms such as occasion which "suggests the proper time for action,"<sup>41</sup> or opening which "is an opportunity affording a good possibility of success."<sup>42</sup> The expansion of the concept gives the JFC a more complete understanding of the possibilities afforded in its action. Second, it completely separates, by meaning, opportunity with disruptions, explicitly leaving the reader with a belief that opportunity cannot be found within the elements of an enemy's actions or reactions. Previous historical examples prove this to be incorrect. Further, if it is "based on anticipated events" should not one of those events be an opportunity to bypass or skip DPs if they have become irrelevant? If branch planning continues to answer the "what if," then that "what if" must also mean possibly encountering an intermediate objective, or crucial DP that was previously thought to be outside the limits of this phase. In all cases, the institutional mindset of what a branch can offer the JFC has been degraded, and this point is even further emphasized within doctrine.

Doctrinal publications currently view branches in a manner that attempts to state their intended flexibility offered to the JFC, but does not expand upon the process in the initial planning cycle. Additionally, branches are continually discussed as a method to deal with contingencies that had not been either recognized or fully thought out during the initial planning process. Incredulously, JP 3-0 expands upon this concept by linking it as a benefit to the “compression of planning/decision timeline” stating that “commanders, planners and others can decide quickly on branches and sequels to the campaign or operation.”<sup>43</sup> How the movement of forces, as well as supporting elements can be quickly decided upon without fully recognizing the elements of the planning cycle seems to be a juxtaposition of what the JOPP currently prescribes. Further, JP 3-0 continues to link branches with risk and not opportunity stating “to alleviate or reduce risk, commanders may...execute a branch or take other measures to reduce or bypass enemy capabilities.”<sup>44</sup> This failure to recognize, or at least address, the possibility of opportunity does not even recognize the current, ineffective doctrinal definition. Finally, JP 3-0 expands upon the concept of branches stating “JFCs build flexibility into their plans by developing branches...to preserve freedom of action in rapidly changing conditions.”<sup>45</sup> This statement however, leads the reader to believe that the “freedom of action” stated is in order to execute the chosen COA as planned, not an emphasis on unanticipated opportunities, and continues to guide both the JFC and his staff in a direction to focus on the chosen COA. This last statement further embellishes the current colloquialism of “don’t fall in love with the plan.” Both JP 3-0 and JP 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning*, regurgitate the same theme in regards to branches and add little in the way of the “opportunity” that was stated in its definition.

JP 5-0 outlines the process of implementing operational art and design into the concept of operations utilizing JOPP continues the trend of branch diminishment in its processes. Currently, within JOPP, during COA war gaming, the planning staff will attempt to identify possible branch scenarios through exercising the selected COA.<sup>46</sup> JP 3-33, *Joint Task Force Headquarters*, states that once identified, branch plans become the subject of Crisis Action Planning (CAP) and are no longer formally exercised within the JOPP process until after the publication of the OPORD/OPLAN.<sup>47</sup> Branch plan development is assigned to the J-3, Future Operations cell, after their identification. The J-3 works with the J-5, Future Plans cell, in order to conduct CAP to execute a branch. This is due to the fact that J-5 is responsible for planning sequels and reinforces the concept of current operations affecting sequel transition. However, it also alludes to the fact that branch planning and execution can have a direct influence on future sequels, both when and where they are executed.<sup>48</sup> However, these operations are currently, doctrinally conducted during CAP, hence, after the OPORD or OPLAN has been published and/or during the execution of the chosen COA along the LOO.

Without leaving COA war gaming with a division of branch plans into risk or opportunity categories, the planning staffs are naturally placed in a position where any further planning will be done to protect the already chosen, deliberately planned COA. JP 5-0 emphatically points this out by stating “planning continues during execution, with the initial emphasis on refining the existing plan and producing the OPORD.”<sup>49</sup> As seen in the introductory paragraph, the lack of recognition that the plan may be unnecessary, coupled with a sense of inertia to support the current plan, led Admiral Nimitz to approve the landings at Peleliu even after the recommendations of his subordinates to the contrary. This type of reactionary

planning can only be broken through the re-education of the branch, its doctrinal application, a change within the steps of branch identification and, most importantly, the leadership and guidance of the JFC.

## **VII. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The first recommendation begins with how doctrine defines the issue. The current definition of a branch must be adjusted in order to develop JFCs who can utilize all tools to exploit opportunity. This will reinforce the current asymmetrical situation that condenses planning timelines and have led to most operations outside of major combat to be labeled contingencies. For that reason, by establishing a new definition of a branch a generation of officers will come to think of it less as a mitigating factor. Instead, realizing that a branch, when critiqued by both, ends, ways, means, and risk as well as time, space and force, the JFC will begin to utilize it as an effective means of economizing force while generating tempo. Therefore, the following is proposed as a new definition of the branch:

The contingency operation built into a basic plan. A branch is used in order to *maximize operational flexibility and economy of force* by changing the mission, orientation, or direction of movement of a force to aid success of the operation based on anticipated events, disruptions caused by enemy actions, and *exploiting opportunities inherent to both situations*.

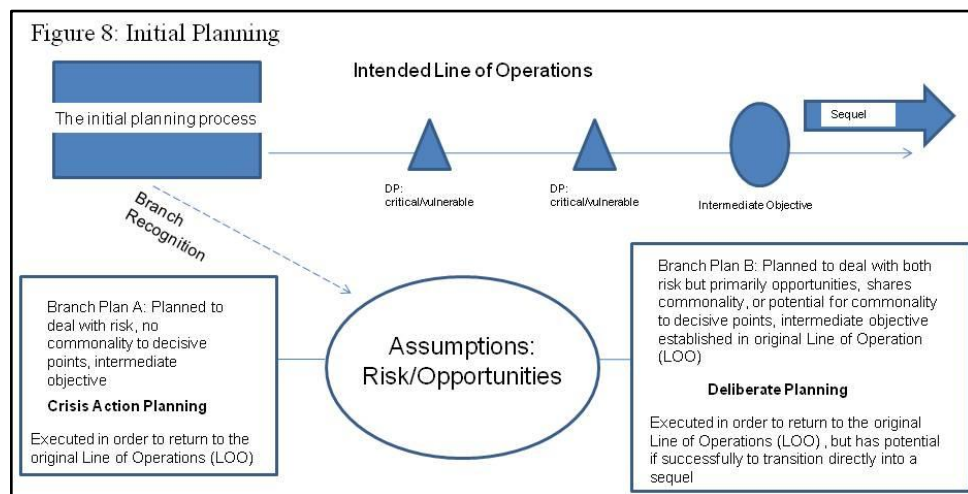
While this new definition does not seem a radical departure from the current definition it emphasizes both flexibility and exploitation of opportunity inherent to the concept of branch development. In addition it reinforces to the JFC the principle of economy of force and its diminishing factor when applied to any operation.

Second, adjust doctrine to reflect the application of this new definition in order to begin the process of exploiting opportunity when presented, regardless of method. As explained, branches currently are relegated to an afterthought for the JFC and his staff. Branches must

become an element that cannot be overlooked in operational design. Currently, within JP 3-0, the word opportunity is not collocated or associated with how we define or apply a branch. An example of this type of thinking, based on an already given example, would be changing the line “to alleviate or reduce risk, commanders may...execute a branch or take other measures to reduce or bypass enemy capabilities,”<sup>50</sup> to “alleviate or reduce risk or to exploit opportunity.....” This simple change would dramatically alter the tone of our doctrine and would lead to JFCs viewing the branch in its true character.

Third, within JOPP, when identifying possible branches within COA war gaming, the JFC must be capable of further developing those which have the possibility of presenting opportunity. Subsequently, those identified as branches of opportunity would be afforded

ample initial  
planning  
prior to  
execution.  
  
Figure 8  
illustrated the  
recognition



of branches as both risk and opportunity and subsequently divides them for planning purposes.

This step would allow the planning staff to assist the JFC in not only identifying risk to the LOO, but reinforces the fact that an enemy reaction is also an opportunity for counteraction capable of developing those elements we cannot account for initially.

Napoleon applied Bourcet’s concept that “every plan of a campaign ought to have several

branches and to have been so well thought out that one or another of the said branches cannot fail of success.”<sup>51</sup> This concept of being “so well thought out” is missing in the current planning process where a branch plan is assigned to CAP only after the OPORD or OPLAN is completed. By identifying those relevant, opportunistic branch plans early enough, the planning staff allows for greater chance of success to occur once the friction of combat is added.

Currently, we equate the conditions necessary to achieve our intermediate objective by defining DPs; we sequence those decisive points along our LOO and assign resources to their completion. However, in order for previous DPs to remain germane they must continually be assessed in regards to the objective. Therefore, every opportunity must be made within the planning process to develop branch plans that have the potential to be exploited even further either by their ability to mitigate or negate decisive points in order to become direct locations for transition directly into a sequel.

In order for branch to sequel transition to take place the elements of time, space, force must be taken into account. In addition to the time spent in conducting initial planning for such an operation, the JFC must also be able to recognize within a condensed and more than likely chaotic, situation the elements within a branch plan before or during their execution that would possibly lead to initiation of a branch to sequel transition. This time factor also includes how both combat and supporting elements can react to the shift in weight of effort and their ability to deal with the deletion of planned DPs or possibly their omission.

Therefore, it is essential that in the initial planning process, the JFC emphasize to his staff elements as well as subordinate commanders, to not rely upon pre-ordained DPs as planned, and to retain operational flexibility to adjust to both the element of time as well as changes to

where, when and how decisive points may be achieved in the fluidity of battle. Within the element of space, the JFC must recognize what he is both gaining and ceding in conducting branch to sequel transition. DPs and intermediate objectives were chosen for a reason, specifically to be able to defeat the enemy COG indirectly through phased sequels. Again, sequels add depth to your operation, so therefore the JFC must initially ask the question does this transition provide the depth needed to begin the sequel initiation. Additionally, can we sequence from possibly a different intermediate objective? Space is also a factor of operational maneuver and the ability to bring to bear all combat power against the enemy. In both the Pacific vignette as well as the Eastern Front we are reminded of combat that was conducted across vast areas. The current JFC will more than likely be presented with smaller operations that do not necessarily offer the maneuver space as historically described, however, the elements of key terrain still remain relevant regardless of size of the battle field.

Finally, the factor of force is a key element conducted in this type of maneuver, specifically its economy and the ability to concentrate forces at the point of transition. This element takes into account both time and space with regards to notifying and moving elements to exploit the opportunity presented. However, it also entails the ceding of any gains made toward planned DPs and intermediate objectives achieved up until that point. It also changes the dynamic of when the JFC estimates he will reach his culminating point of attack and specifically equates to why intermediate objectives are used; in order to concentrate forces (i.e. re-supply and re-orient) for an eventual sequel. Additionally, economy of force, a prevalent factor in any operation, can be stressed by concurrent main effort and branch execution and be even further stretched if forces must be shifted along a LOO in order to exploit a branch.

All three elements, time, space, force, have an effect on how the JFC will view these operations prior to and during the execution of branch plans. The above mentioned points emphasize the need to conduct deliberate planning for possible opportunistic branch plans prior to conducting operations along the LOO. If indeed the elements of time, space, force are balanced against the elements of ends, ways, means, and risk the JFC will be able to provide more prevalent guidance to what branch plans he deems worthy of further deliberate planning and which branch plans would remain within the intent of protecting the decided upon LOO and its geographic elements.

#### **VIII. CONCLUSION:**

The lives of 1,950 bear mute testimony to operational inflexibility. Without the necessary changes within the definition, the doctrine and its application within JOPP, the JFC will be unable to fully integrate the inherent advantages of a branch into a flexible operational design. Failure to do so not only imperils the design of the operation, it tangibly risks the ability to accomplish the ultimate objective. Branch to sequel transition via omission of DPs or by their migration does not negate the current planning model; it augments the process in order to prepare the commander for future, potentially weighty decisions. It also orients the JFC to plan for eventualities that currently would have been relegated to “what if” only as it pertains to our already embarked upon plan. If done correctly, and with foresight to all elements of combat power, it can serve as a tool to further hone the identification of DPs and intermediate objectives in order to recognize all factors taking place within the operational area. Additionally, it continues to reinforce the elements of ends, ways, means and risk as well as time, space, force within the entire staff. With the eventual application of its true character, branches can serve as a means to avoid battles such as Peleliu. A battle in which

“Marines fought and suffered, and prevailed”<sup>52</sup> for an object that 65 years later “is an enduring question of whether [its] capture was essential.”<sup>53</sup>

## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Brigadier General Gordon D. Gayle, USMC (Ret), *BLOODY BEACHES: The Marines at Peleliu*, Marines in World War II Commemorative Series, (Marine Corps Historical Center 1996),  
<http://www.nps.gov/archive/wapa/indepth/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003137-00/sec12.htm> (accessed April 24, 2009), 12.
- <sup>3</sup> Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operation Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 26 December 2006), III-11.
- <sup>4</sup> Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Operations*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 17 September 2006), IV-6.
- <sup>5</sup> JP 3-0, IV-10.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., IV-11.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., IV-12.
- <sup>8</sup> Joint Force Staff College, Joint Advanced Warfighting School, *Operational Art and Campaigning Primer AY 09-10*, Joint Operations Planning Process, (Norfolk, VA), 268.
- <sup>9</sup> JP 3-0, IV-12.
- <sup>10</sup> Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication (JP) 1-02 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 12 April 2001),  
[http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new\\_pubs/jp1\\_02.pdf](http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf) (accessed April 21, 2009), 72.
- <sup>11</sup> JP 3-0, IV-13.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., IV-13.
- <sup>13</sup> Baron Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, (Greenhill Books, 1992), 91.
- <sup>14</sup> Philip A. Crowl, *Campaign in the Marianas*, vol 9., *United States Army in World War II, The War in the Pacific* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1960), 441.
- <sup>15</sup> Operational Art and Campaigning Primer AY 09-10, 389.
- <sup>16</sup> Russell J. Goehring. "Sequencing Operations: The Critical Path of Operational Art" (research paper, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Command and General Staff College, 1987) 2.
- <sup>17</sup> Steven N. Read, "Planning for the Unplannable: Branches, Sequels and Reserves, A Monograph"(research paper, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Command and General Staff College, 1990), 16.
- <sup>18</sup> Read, 5.
- <sup>19</sup> JP 5-0, GL-6.
- <sup>20</sup> Operational Art and Campaigning Primer AY 09-10, 389.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 390.
- <sup>22</sup> Read, 18.
- <sup>23</sup> Morrison, 11.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Morrison, 13.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>27</sup> JP 3-0, IV-12.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., IV-12.
- <sup>29</sup> Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare, Theory and Practice*, 20 September 2007, GL-14.
- <sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decision*, (University of California Press, 1985), 24.
- <sup>31</sup> Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad*, (Viking Penguin, 1998), 65.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 65.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 67.
- <sup>34</sup> Frederick Morgan, "*COSSAC(Chief of Staff, Supreme Allied Commander) Plan*" (source document 1943),  
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- <sup>35</sup> Martin Blumenson, *Liberation*, (Time-Life Books, 1978), 16.
- <sup>36</sup> Morrison, 13.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 14.
- <sup>38</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Victors*, (Simon & Shuster, 1998), 274.

<sup>39</sup> Morrison, 289.

<sup>40</sup> JP 5-0, GL-6.

<sup>41</sup> *American Heritage Dictionary* Online, s.v. “opportunity.”

<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/opportunity> (accessed April 22, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> JP 3-0, III-11.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., III-13.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., IV-21.

<sup>46</sup> JP 5-0, III-30.

<sup>47</sup> Chairman, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Task Force Headquarters*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-33 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 16 February 2007), IX-10.

<sup>48</sup> JP 5-0, IV-31.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., III-57.

<sup>50</sup> JP 3-0, III-13.

<sup>51</sup> B.H. Liddel-Hart, *Strategy*, (Praeger, 1967) 343.

<sup>52</sup> Gayle, 12.

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